

A Far Ranging Tour of All Things Psi

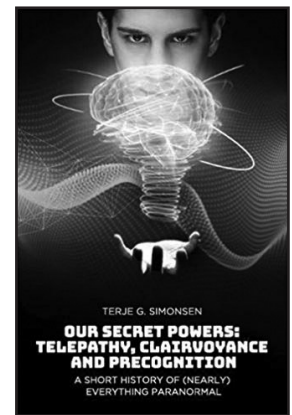
George R. Williams¹

A review of *Our Secret Powers: Telepathy, Clairvoyance, and Precognition. A Short History of (Nearly) Everything Paranormal*, by Terje G. Simonsen. Pari Publishing, 2018. Pp. 498. \$19.29. ISBN 978-1-5247-5882-0

Terje Simonsen, a Norwegian writer and historian of ideas, presents a highly readable and wide-ranging exploration of psi in his book, *Our Secret Powers: Telepathy, Clairvoyance, and Precognition: A Short History of (Nearly) Everything Paranormal*. While it is an excellent introduction to those new or generally curious around the topic, I believe scholars and many others more familiar with the material will also find it of value.

Simonsen begins his book presenting various cases of psychics and remote viewers probing for ancient artifacts in the service of archeology. Some of the historical findings are real prizes; they include King Richard III's bones, key structures at Glastonbury Abbey, and the remains of temples and palaces that appear to be associated with Cleopatra and the Lighthouse of Alexandria. But in the following chapter Simonsen, shifts toward the opposite end of the spectrum: formal investigations of psi within the military, both within the US and the former Soviet Union. And from there Simonsen explores psi within the field of anthropology, where several cases feature healing within non-Western cultures as well as some anthropologists stepping into radically different culture frames and encountering non-material entities. But perhaps the most valuable contribution from an anthropological perspective is the contribution psi makes to a greater sense of meaning or being connected to a greater whole.

However, as a historian of ideas, Simonsen is not content to merely present the various reports as such, as tantalizing as they may be. He also explores the evolution of the intellectual foundations of psi, as well as some of the currents of thought that rose in opposition. The centuries during and after the scientific renaissance were a pivotal time period when the powerful concept of mechanism or machine emerged as a way to understand the workings of our world, as well as a framework to dismiss rather ineffable or mysterious phenomena. Simonsen notes that Franz Anton Mesmer in 18th century Paris achieved impressive results and celebrity status through his unconventional theories of animal magnetism, laying on of hands technique, and considerable charisma. But despite many reported healings, a French royal commission (that included Benjamin Franklin) cast doubt on whether there was anything beyond what could be ascribed to "imagination." Simonsen also explores a number of important phi-



¹ Address correspondence to: George R. Williams, Ph. D., 8004 Maple Ave. Takoma Park, MD, 20912, USA, grwilliams@gmail.com

losophers who engaged with the possibility of psi, including Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Schelling, and Schopenhauer. Perhaps especially interesting was Kant, who apparently was considerably more open toward psi in his private letters and lectures than he was in his more public writings.

Later, another fascinating historical period includes William James, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and transpersonal pioneer Stan Groff. The relationship between Freud and Jung, with its fracture based largely on their different capacities to embrace the paranormal, is of course familiar territory. Nevertheless, many will find this chapter of psi history fascinating in Simonsen's telling. Simonsen spends some time bringing to the reader key ideas from Jung, including his notions of archetypes, synchronicity, and the collective unconscious. But like much of the book, although the material serves as a good introduction, those wishing a deeper understanding of Jung (as well as Freud and James) are advised to look elsewhere.

As Simonsen turns toward the persistent mystery of consciousness, there is reason to suspect that the emphasis on mechanism for explaining all things and dismissing the ineffable may be on the wane. Simonsen notes that the philosopher David Chalmers has become influential for framing the "hard problem of consciousness." For Chalmers, the easy problems are those involving some sort of mechanism, such as learning, memory, or perception (Chalmers, 1996). But the hard problem does not involve a mechanism or function; the hard problem is the problem of subjective experience. Many philosophers such as Chalmers who take the hard problem seriously advocate taking consciousness as fundamental, in some sense. Exploring that avenue, Simonsen introduces us to *Irreducible Mind: Toward a Psychology for the 21st Century* (Kelly et al., 2007). Many of the authors covered here borrow and build on the ideas of Frederic Myers. Simonsen is apt at summarizing the core notions:

Consciousness is basically an immense field of information, and the brain can be understood as an ultra-sophisticated filter that condenses, sorts, modulates, and organizes this field. And the reason that for most of us experiences of the paranormal are not everyday occurrences is simply that our brains filter out most of these episodes! (pp. 250-251)

In his chapter on consciousness, Simonsen puts most attention on this "brain as filter" model, but he also casts relatively brief looks at alternatives, such as the quantum brain framework developed by Stuart Hameroff and Roger Penrose, as well as David Bohm's implicate order.

Maintaining the pattern of exploring psi from different angles, Simonsen includes a chapter on the psi skeptics and the primary arguments used against psi advocates. Here, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry plays a key historical role. Although there is little new here to those familiar with the field, the various controversies and political disagreements within the organization continue to merit interest and attention. Further, I do find Simonsen's discussion of the outsized role that scientism plays among the skeptically inclined to be rather admirable, as well as his suggestion that not everything that is true can be determined solely within the laboratory.

But speaking of the laboratory, the author covers a good bit of ground there as well. Most of his attention is given to J. B. Rhine's research at Duke University, which began in the 1930s. The emphasis is understandable, given Simonsen's historical bent, as well as the crucial role Rhine's work played in the field. Simonsen discusses the battles with arguments and prejudices that Rhine won with great perseverance, as well as others that persist today. Other laboratory research covered includes the dream

telepathy experiments pioneered by Montague Ullman and Stanley Krippner; Charles Honorton's investigation of telepathy with the ganzfeld method; Bem's innovative tests for precognition; and Roger Nelson's Global Consciousness Project. A few strands of psychokinesis research appear to be left out, including the micro psychokinesis of the PEAR lab and Dean Radin's recent investigations of mental intention on the pattern produced by the well-known double-slit experiment. That said, Simonsen manages to cover a great deal of ground in the relatively small amount of space. For a good, recent overview of the meta-analysis of these and other psi research see Cardeña (2018).

Another place where Simonsen's expertise in the history of ideas pays dividends is his framing for the reader the influence of behaviorism in psychology that loomed large during the time of Rhine's work and probably helped promote a climate of skepticism as laboratory research of psi began. And later, after exploring Bem's research on precognition, he explores various philosophical views on the nature of time, which remains very mysterious. Again, Simonsen's efforts to examine the research and arguments from different angles are admirable.

Throughout his book, Simonsen suggests using what he calls the "Mental Internet" as a helpful explanatory model toward psi. That is, Simonsen invites us to imagine that "somewhat in the way that our computers are linked together via the Internet, the 'consciousness' of all humans and perhaps all living beings is linked together via some sort of Mental Internet" (p. 28) Most will find this an inviting metaphor, given that today's internet employs wireless and cloud based technology, as well as its web-like architecture, in helping us conceptualize the deeper nature of the world that the psi data may be suggesting.

For me, the most appealing models that try to account for psi do explore something like a field of information, perhaps serving as a foundation of our world (see David Bohm's implicate order, for example Bohm, 2005). And I believe Simonsen's "Mental Internet" does help get us into thinking in that direction. However, where I think this metaphor breaks down a little involves the nature of this information at the base of reality. Often, when we speak about information technology, or perhaps information more generally, we are speaking about something that fits into a digital paradigm. This is the type of information that drives our computers, the Internet, and today even audio and video distribution. Further, many intriguing ideas about the origins of our world and consciousness, such as whether our world is a simulation, or if artificial intelligence may one day become conscious, draw heavily on assuming that all kinds of information—even our consciousness—can be completely described in digital terms. My opinion is that the information residing in some sort of consciousness field, perhaps at the root of our world, cannot be completely characterized in this way. But Simonsen likely has a ready answer, a quote he borrows from George E. P. Box: "Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful!" (p. 29)

Near the end of the book, Simonsen quotes Massonobü Sakaguchi, a spokesperson for the electronics giant Sony, who revealed the conclusion of his company's multi-year research into psi: "We found experimentally that, yes, ESP exists but that any practical application of this knowledge is not likely in the foreseeable future." And indeed, the empirical evidence recently reviewed in Cardeña (2018) appears consistent with this; the effect sizes tend to be small, yet significantly different from zero to a substantial degree. If practical applications are questionable, we might ask what is the value in pursuing this research (perhaps leaving aside finding valuable artifacts through remote viewing, covered earlier). Although Simonsen does not give us the deep dive I might have liked here, I believe he does offer some

insight in noting that many instances around the paranormal “tend to occur around people in contact with ‘the deep dimension’ in life—someone seized by the quest for meaning, by an ‘ultimate concern,’ to use an expression from the philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich” (p. 443).

Also, if we are somehow connected with a much wider range of information than what we conventionally take for granted—or wired into a Mental Internet—what might this entail for our everyday lives? One way Simonsen explores this question is by examining the possibility that what we call “intuition” may be grounded in a deeper reality. According to Daniel Kahneman (2011), Nobel laureate psychologist and author of the book, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, “fast” thinking is instant thinking - often associated with intuition or “gut feeling”—that is based on recognizing accumulated patterns that may not rely much on new information.

Kahneman thus argues that what we call intuition might be subject to biases that do not afflict “slow” (analytical) thinking. But Simonsen contrasts this framework with an alternate view from Dutch psychologist Dijksterhuis and his colleagues (Dijksterhuis et al., 2006). They argue that intuition can also be considered a slow kind of thinking, where the unconscious processes in our brain takes time to process a great deal of information. Thus they recommend using the conscious mind to obtain all the information needed for making a decision, but in addition, taking time away from the problem (getting a night’s rest or taking a short holiday). Simonsen suggests that this sort of “deliberation without attention,” relies on prolonged unconscious processes highly valued by creative persons such as artists, inventors, and entrepreneurs. However, Simonsen would include psi among the background processes that support such a creative intuition, producing instances of knowing things we cannot fully account for. Unfortunately, Simonsen does not mention Jim Carpenter’s (2015) *First Sight*, which provides an excellent case for psi working in the background of our unconscious minds.

There is indeed quite a bit more in the book than I have covered, but I hope I have conveyed the impressive range that Simonsen explores. Given this wide range of areas touching on psi, it is understandable that some pieces here and there are missing, and I do not count that as a mark against the book. Overall, Simonsen’s book provides a highly readable, engaging, and thorough introduction to all things psi, and likely provides a good supplement to those more familiar with the field.

References

- Bohm, D. (2005). *Wholeness and the implicate order*. Routledge.
- Cardeña, E. (2018). The experimental evidence for parapsychological phenomena: A review. *American Psychologist*, 73, 663-677. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0000236>
- Carpenter, J. C. (2015). *First sight: ESP and parapsychology in everyday life*. Rowman & Littlefield.
- Chalmers, D. J. (1996). *The conscious mind: In search for a fundamental theory*. Oxford University Press, 1996.
- Dijksterhuis, A., Bos, M.W., Nordgren, L.F., & Van Baaren, R. B. (2006). On making the right choice: The deliberation-without-attention effect. *Science*, 311, 1005-1007.
- Kahneman, D. (2011). *Thinking, fast and slow*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Kelly, E. F., Kelly, E. W., Crabtree, A., Gauld, A., Grosso, M., & Greyson, B. (Eds.) (2007). *Irreducible mind: Toward a psychology for the 21st century*. Rowman & Littlefield.